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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effectiveness of a theory-based classroom instructional method for teaching the vocabulary acquisition process with college developmental reading-writing students. Subjects, 28 students in two sections of developmental freshmen composition, followed a step-by-step procedure in each of five unit plans. The objective of the procedure was to teach students to learn how to understand the 10 most important words in context for each unit and how to learn to move the words from their receptive (listening and reading) to their expressive (speaking and writing) vocabularies. Results indicated that (1) a 98% success rate on vocabulary quizzes was achieved; (2) students began to use their dictionaries habitually; (3) every student passed the final exam; (4) not one student failed the course or withdrew; and (5) the instructor experienced collaborative learning as a process as the students and the instructor worked together on all steps in the procedure. (Contains 15 references and five figures of quizzes and writing assignments.) (RS)

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Vocabulary Acquisition:

A New Instructional Method in the

College Developmental Reading-Writing Classroom

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Category: Discussion of a Successful Instructional Strategy

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Running Head: Vocabulary Acquisition

The purpose of this report is to describe a theory-based classroom instructional method for teaching the vocabulary acquisition process with college developmental reading-writing students. More information about the process may be found in three recently published professional books, Teaching Reading & Study Strategies at the College Level (Flippo & Caverly, 1991a), College Reading and Study Strategy Programs (Flippo & Caverly, 1991b), and Opening The Door to Classroom Research (Olson, 1990).

THEORETICAL RATIONALE

Reading to write is a complex process which includes comprehension and learning from text. The reader's goal is to compose a new text which communicates with an audience (Spivey & King, 1989). Pugh and Pawan (Flippo & Caverly, 1991b) explain that a common challenge faced by readers new to the academic setting is the gap between the complexity of an idea and readers' ability to use language (vocabulary) which conveys the idea. The guidance students receive from each other as they read to write is as least as important as teacher direction. Effective teachers of the reading to write process foster a social, communicative climate in a class which encourages students to dialogue with an author and discuss their findings with each other, which incorporates writing into the process, and which explores both general and discipline-specific knowledge as students learn to articulate their own identities as critical learners. Therefore, the teaching/learning process of reading to write is a collaborative one (Lieberman, 1986) in which the instructor works with the students.

According to Simpson and Dwyer (Flippo and Caverly, 1991a), college students themselves consider vocabulary deficiencies, both general and technical, to be major

causes of difficulty with course content. In their review of the literature of teaching vocabulary acquisition, these authors found only one study (Gnewuch, 1974) which investigated the value of asking college students to choose the words they wanted to learn. This is a serious issue because:

(1) student interest is squelched if someone else makes all the critical learning decisions;

(2) college students can make judgments about what matters to them, and one thing which does is learning to learn vocabulary thoroughly enough to help them succeed in their college courses.

Students' expressed concerns about learning vocabulary are well-founded. Graves (McKeown & Curtis, 1987) notes the dearth of research about how much vocabulary instruction takes place in secondary schools, and more important, points out that there is little research on the task of getting students to move words from their receptive (listening and reading) vocabularies to their expressive (speaking and writing) vocabularies; he found only two studies (Duin, 1983, and Wolfe, 1975) which had investigated the question.

To plan classroom instruction in vocabulary acquisition, college teachers should heed three principles of effective vocabulary instruction defined by Stahl (1986):

Principle 1 - Give both context and definitions;

Principle 2 - Encourage deep processing -- Association, Comprehension, and Generation processing;

Principle 3 - Give multiple exposures. To these principles, I will add one more:

Principle 4 - Empower college students with choices in the decision-making process.

Although Simpson and Dwyer (Flippo and Caverly, 1991a) indicate that more research on vocabulary instruction at the college level is needed, especially with regard to particular instructional approaches and programs, they claim that there is enough evidence to identify five characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction at the college level:

(1) Use of a variety of learning tasks in the instructional method;

(2) The active role of the learner - instructors can modify existing materials to involve students;

(3) Use of vocabulary in context - the instructor selects or has students select words from materials they are reading;

(4) Capitalizing on student interest - students select words they think are important to learn, and build a class vocabulary list for use in all four language processes, particularly speaking and writing;

(5) Intensity of instruction - instructors should be selective about the words to be taught and the number of them, so that there is time for multiple exposures and the cumulative review necessary for long-term retention and independent use of the words learned.

METHOD

Students

The students were two sections of developmental freshmen (N = 28) placed in the course according to criteria defined by the college (The Writing Program, 1988). Their academic talents were as diverse (Cross, 1976) as the definition of developmental, as opposed to remedial, implies.

Materials

The syllabus for this first-semester course included five major Unit Plans:

(1) "Jeaning," based on Carin C. Quinn's 1984 article, "The Jeaning of America -- And The World" (Goshgarian, 1990);

(2) "Weather," a reading in the content areas Unit Plan from Kennedy and Smith (1986);

(3) "Wait/Stand/Serve," based on Andrew Ward's 1979 humorous, satirical article, "They Also Wait Who Stand And Serve Themselves" (Goshgarian, 1990);

(4) "Gender Roles in the Home," a comparison-contrast Unit Plan based on William Raspberry's 1977 column, "Homemaking," and Judy Syfers' 1971 article, "I Want A Wife" (Goshgarian, 1990);

(5) "Scofflaws," a study skills Unit Plan designed for practice in taking essay exams, based on Frank Trippett's 1983 essay, "A Red Light for Scofflaws" (Kennedy & Smith, 1986).

Each of the first four Unit Plans included instruction with the new vocabulary acquisition method.

Design

Students' progress (2 sections totaling 28 students) in vocabulary acquisition was

measured four times over the course of the semester by means of written vocabulary quizzes. Their final examination grades and final grades in the course were to be compared with those of ten previous sections of the same course (N = 158 students) taught by the same instructor according to the same course grading standards.

Procedure

In each of the four Unit Plans, the overall goal of the process was to select the 10 words most important to understanding and writing about the reading. The objectives were to teach students to learn how to understand these words in context and how to learn to move the words from their receptive (listening and reading) to their expressive (speaking and writing) vocabularies.

In each Unit, the step-by-step procedure was as follows:

I. As the words were selected in class from the context of the reading, class members helped each other identify the ***part of speech*** of each word ***as used in the reading***.

II. For homework, students looked up the words as ***the same part of speech***, and wrote them in meaningful sentences of their own which:

A. Showed what the word means (no circular definitions) in a context which was important to and made sense to them (the sentences did not have to be about the reading, they could be based upon students' personal interests and experiences);

B. Were grammatically correct.

III. Students brought their sentences to class, where they shared them aloud, asked questions, and received questions and suggestions from everyone in the group (including the instructor).

IV. Students studied their own sentences for the Quiz.

V. The Quiz was a closed book, closed notes exercise (20 minutes) with the words

given -- so that students didn't have to remember what the words were, but instead, could concentrate on what the words meant to them. (See Figure 1).

VI. When I returned the graded quizzes to the students, we went over their responses again, reading aloud student-generated responses rated correct, +Good, or better.

VII. Students had in their hands, and at their command, language they could use for the reading to write process, which is directed toward a goal.

VIII. Each student received a written copy of the reading to write assignment as the Unit Plan began. (See Figure 2 for an example).

PROCESS RESULTS

This teaching method incorporates the three principles of effective vocabulary instruction defined by Stahl (1986) and the one the author added, and the five characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction at the college level identified by Simpson and Dwyer (Flippo & Caverly, 1991a). A variety of learning tasks helps students process words occurring naturally in prose content; all four language processes are employed as students learn to move carefully selected words from their receptive to their expressive vocabularies in a 10-step process which lends itself to multiple exposures to the words:

(1) Reading the text;

(2) Responding in writing to homework questions about the text and discussing these in class;

(3) Selecting the specific vocabulary words crucial to students' understanding of the reading;

(4) Looking up the meanings of these words as they are used in the reading;

(5) Using the words in meaningful sentences of their own;

(6) Sharing their own sentences in class;

(7) Writing a Quiz based on their own sentences;

(8) Discussing and sharing Quiz answers;

(9) Writing a draft of the paper and sharing papers in a peer workshop;

(10) Writing a Final Draft of the paper.

What intensified over time, however, was the engagement and investment of student interest in selecting which words were important to learn, and what changed was the role of the instructor in this collaborative process.

I. For "Jeaning," I chose the 10 words I thought were crucial to the reading to write process. As we talked aloud and read aloud for these specific words, some students insisted that proletarian was crucial. THEY WERE RIGHT! So, as the class drew to a close, I told them that there would be an extra credit Bonus Question. (I had begun to understand that I was learning from the collaborative process, and realized that overnight I'd have to assume more responsibility as a partner in it and define what the nature of such a Bonus should mean to all of us).

II. For "Weather," again I chose the 10 words I thought were important, but led students through the process with the explicit understanding that they would select the Bonus Question (that technique had already been a hit!) and that some of the choice of required words would be negotiable in the group discussion. The students choose the Bonus, and without my telling them, they negotiated the choice of two words I had selected. (I was beginning to learn to listen more and talk less). Another predictable but serendipitous event occurred; we hit some of the same words we had

previously studied so carefully. Students were adamant about excluding known words. "We did that one already. We know it." One student comment universally considered "awesome" (because it was based on "Jeaning") was, "Boy, proletarian sure is ubiquitous." (See Figure 3).

III. By the time attacked Unit Three, "Wait/Stand/Serve," students chose half the words by negotiation in class discussion and they selected the Bonus. Class discussion was lively and was peppered with arguments for individuals' choices. This article is a humorous, satirical piece, so some of the words are used in very unusual ways. (See Figure 4).

IV. For "Gender Roles in the Home," we used two sources. By this time, I had learned to step back and facilitate rather than dominate the selection process. We approached the vocabulary list for this unit as completely negotiable by popular vote. Each of the students brought in his/her choices of words which were most important to understanding the reading. Altogether, students had selected 29 words. We went around the group, one word at a time, saying, "What's the word? Ennobling? How many people chose it?" We then continued the negotiation process to narrow the list. "How many people had klatches? Six. Episodic? Six. Which is more important to understanding the reading?" (Discussion and negotiation). A student supplied the answer, "Episodic because homemaking is episodic, and a klatch is only one kind of episode." (See Figure 5).

OTHER RESULTS

Over the course of an entire semester, there were only two F's on all four quizzes shown. Therefore, 110/112 is a 98% Success Rate. Yes, the Bonus Questions made a difference, and yes, there were some D's. But yes, I graded the Quiz sentences for grammatical correctness.

Students' behaviors changed. They became used their dictionaries habitually and were no longer "too busy or too lazy" to look up words they realized were keys to the process of reading to write.

Students marked their practice final ("Scofflaws") and Final Exam readings and drafts (both were open dictionary) with words and definitions they had looked up independently.

Everyone passed the Final Exam, which has not always been the case, and there were no D's on it.

Not one student failed the course or withdrew, which has not always been the case, so there was a 100% Completion Rate.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTIONS

Of course one cannot prove that the introduction of one new teaching method (procedure) led to the success rates indicated in these classes any more than one can prove that success in a developmental reading-writing course is the cause of success in students' other courses. However, I will use this theory-based, classroom-researched approach again because I can claim that:

(1) Two classes of young adults empowered themselves as college students in charge of their own learning about the process of vocabulary acquisition;

(2) As the instructor, I experienced collaborative learning as a process we share with students, not something we do to them, a lesson I learned with my students (Meyer, 1990).

For future reference and classroom research, as Gnewuch (1974) investigated, it is valuable to let college students select the words they want to learn. Graves' review of the research on vocabulary acquisition and his suggestions about what practitioners need to know (McKeown & Curtis, 1987) were particularly enlightening and inspiring. Duin (1983) took 10 words that lent themselves to good writing and which excited students about learning and using words. This classroom instructional method used that idea and provided support for it. Wolfe (1975) found that general vocabulary instruction helped improve college students' use of vocabulary of similar complexity to the words studied as they wrote compositions. This work generally supports her hypothesis and highlights the need for future research in college developmental classrooms.

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Figure 1

VOCABULARY QUIZ I

Directions. Keep your books closed, and use your own paper.

(1) Write each of the following words in a grammatically correct sentence of your own, using each as the same part of speech used in our article, "Jeaning."

(2) Write on every other line.

(3) Underline the vocabulary word in your sentence,

(4) Use the words in the order in which they are given.

(5) You may choose to do the Bonus Question. If you answer it correctly, the points

count for you; if you answer it incorrectly, the points do not count against you.

(1) ubiquitous
(2) appropriated
(3) synonymous
(4) eke
(5) abound
(6) ensuing
(7) symbol
(8) girth
(9) tribute
(10) idiosyncratic

Bonus Question

(11) proletarian

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Figure 2

WRITING ASSIGNMENT I

Write a five-paragraph Summary/Reaction Essay on "The Jeaning of America -- and the World," by Carin C. Quinn.

(1) The introductory paragraph should include a clear THESIS statement which explains the purpose of your essay to the reader.

(2) The second and third paragraphs should summarize the main points of the content of the article.

(3) The fourth paragraph should be your personal reaction, i.e., I think, I feel, or I believe, in response to the topic. Use your homework answer to any one of the Topical Questions # 1-5 to focus the content of this paragraph.

(4) The concluding paragraph should include a restatement of your THESIS. It should also summarize the content of each of your body paragraphs. The very last sentence should be a "clincher" which stresses the importance of the topic.

Other Hints

(1) Create an interesting title of your own based on your THESIS and related to your reaction.

(2) Make use of some of the strong, clear vocabulary words we have studied.

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Figure 3

VOCABULARY QUIZ II

(The directions were the same for all four Vocabulary Quizzes).

(1) mirth
(2) stipulated
(3) distinctive
(4) adornment
(5) utilitarian
(6) proficient
(7) ascertain
(8) commodity
(9) proliferation
(10) intrinsic

Bonus Question

(11) facilitate

##

Figure 4

VOCABULARY QUIZ 3

(1) nostalgia
(2) contemptuous
(3) forlorn
(4) semantic
(5) engendered
(6) mongrel
(7) appalled
(8) aberration
(9) dictum
(10) retaliation

Bonus Question

(11) sepulcher

##

Figure 5

VOCABULARY QUIZ 4

(1) akin
(2) mystique
(3) fiscal
(4) onerous
(5) disrepute
(6) episodic
(7) precedent
(8) psyche
(9) unequivocally
(10) ennobling

Bonus Questions (By student mandate, there were two).

(11) eloquently

(12) affect

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